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STALKING *the* **DRAGON**

A FABLE
of TONIGHT

A John Justin Mallory Mystery

MIKE RESNICK



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To Carol, as always,

and to John Justin Mallory's lovely ladyfriends at Pyr:

Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

Jacqueline Cooke

Amy Greenan

Chris Kramer

Jill Maxick

Lynette Nisbet

Lynn Pasquale

Nicole Sommer-Lecht

CHAPTER 1

5:21 PM–5:48 PM, Valentine’s Day

John Justin Mallory stood before the mirror, hands on hips, an annoyed expression on his face.

“Do you mind?” he said irritably.

“Do I mind playing an endless series of Bettie Page movies for you when I could be showing you Shakespeare?” replied Periwinkle, his magic mirror. “Of course I mind, and let me add how thoughtful it is of you to mention it.”

Bettie Page’s image was instantly replaced by Laurence Olivier holding up a pair of test tubes in a laboratory.

“What the hell is *that*?” demanded Mallory.

“A chemistry problem,” answered Periwinkle. “Tube B or not Tube B?” The mirror laughed so uproariously that it almost fell off its hook on the wall. “You’re not even smiling. You have no sense of humor whatsoever, John Justin.” A tragic sigh. “All right; here’s *Hamlet*.”

“I didn’t laugh when you showed me *Abbott and Costello Meet Macbeth*, either,” said Mallory. “May I just have my image, please?”

“Why?” asked Periwinkle. “You haven’t shaved in three days and you’re late on your haircut. You’re going to walk into the barber shop and they’ll ask if you want them to take five months off the top.” The mirror paused thoughtfully. “Let me guess: You blew your haircut money betting on Flyaway.”

“His money probably crawled away on its belly,” said a voice from atop the refrigerator in the next room. “Even then, Flyaway couldn’t have caught it.”

Mallory turned to glare at the owner of the voice, who was human in shape and feline in almost all other aspects.

“When I want your opinion,” he said, “rest assured I’ll ask for it.”

“That’s what Flyaway does,” replied Felina from atop the refrigerator. “He rests assured.”

“Go kill a mouse or something,” growled Mallory. He turned back to the mirror. “And you—let’s have my image, and be quick about it.”

“All right, go ahead, berate me,” sniffed Periwinkle. “Pretend I’m just an *object*, that I don’t have feelings and dreams and sexual needs like anyone else.”

“If you’ve got ‘em, they’re like *nobody* else,” said Mallory. “Now are you going to show me my image, or do I have to go next door to Madame Magenta’s?”

“The tarot reader?” said Periwinkle. “Watch out for her, John Justin. She’s out for you.”

“And which of her four hundred pounds do you think is going to catch me first?” replied Mallory sardonically.

“Well, let me see . . .” said Periwinkle. “She tilts to the left, but she scratches with her right hand, and—”

“*Goddammit!*” bellowed Mallory.

“All right, all right,” said the mirror petulantly as it finally displayed his image. “I was just trying to answer your question.”

“Shut up,” said Mallory.

“You tell him, John Justin!” said Felina, leaping lightly to the floor and approaching him. “Next thing you know he’ll be asking you to skritch his back. That’s *my* job.”

“Scratching the mirror’s back?”

“*Skritching*,” she corrected him. “And no, it’s not my job to skritch the mirror’s back. It’s my job to have my back skritchted by you.”

She sidled up to him, turned her back, and rubbed it up and down against his hip.

“Later,” said Mallory, pulling out a comb that was missing three teeth and starting to run it through his hair.

“How much later?” persisted Felina.

“Seventeen years,” said Mallory.

“Is that more or less than an hour?” asked the cat-girl.

“Yes,” said Mallory.

“What’s this all about anyway?” asked Periwinkle. “I can’t remember the last time you combed your hair. And isn’t that a new shirt you’re wearing—or at least a clean one?”

“I just got it back from Chen Li Kugleman’s Laundry, Chop Suey, and

Bagel Shop.” Mallory grimaced. “I guess it had been there seven months. He wanted to charge me rent.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“This is February 14,” said Mallory. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“It means if yesterday wasn’t February 13, we’ve got a hell of a class-action lawsuit against the calendar company,” replied the mirror.

“It’s Valentine’s Day.”

“And you have a hot date, and you’re watching Bettie Page take off her clothes to get in the mood?” said Periwinkle. “*Now* it all makes sense.”

Mallory stared at the mirror, ignoring the image of the middle-aged detective that was staring back at him. “You have an exceptionally vile mind, you know that?”

“Hey, my last two owners never asked for Bettie Page movies,” said Periwinkle.

“They were a corrupt magician and an incompetent military officer,” noted Mallory.

“True, they did ask for films of teenaged girls with barnyard animals,” continued the mirror, “but they never asked for Bettie Page, and they never hung me where I was surrounded by peeling paint.”

“Well, that makes it all okay, then.”

“You’re not skritch-ing, John Justin,” purred Felina.

“The seventeen years aren’t up,” said Mallory, adjusting his tie in the mirror.

“Oh,” said Felina. She fell silent for a few seconds. Then: “Are they up yet?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, John Justin,” she said. Then: “Now?”

Mallory sighed and began scratching between her shoulder blades.

“I had no idea seventeen years was such a long time,” said Felina, wriggling in pleasure. Suddenly she hissed.

“What’s the problem?” asked Mallory.

“You’re scratching,” she said. “I want you to skritch.”

“Old war wound,” said Mallory. “All I can do with that hand is scratch.”

“You didn’t have it yesterday,” said Felina accusingly. “When did you get it?”

“Eighteen years ago,” said Mallory.

The answer seemed to satisfy her, and she went back to purring contentedly.

“So who are you dating?” asked Periwinkle. “The usual?”

“The usual?” asked Mallory, puzzled.

“Some bimbo whose bustline equals her IQ.”

“I haven’t had a date in the two years I’ve been in this Manhattan,” said Mallory.

“Then I wish you all the luck in the world,” said Periwinkle. “Get her drunk. Take her back to your apartment. Score early and often.”

“Are you quite through?” asked Mallory.

“For the moment,” said the mirror. “But you still haven’t told me who you’re taking out for dinner.”

“Winnifred Carruthers.”

“The fat broad?” said Periwinkle, shocked, as Felina burst into giggles.

“The *stocky* br—” Mallory cut himself short. “The stocky woman.”

“She’s got to have twenty years and thirty pounds on you, John Justin,” said Periwinkle. “Surely you can do better than that!”

“She’s my friend—and my partner,” said Mallory. “And the only person in this Manhattan who’s never deserted me.”

“I keep *meaning* to desert you, John Justin, really I do,” said Felina apologetically. “But I always forget.”

“Thanks for the thought,” said Mallory.

“Well, the fat broad may be your partner,” said Felina, “but I’m your . . .” She paused, frowning. “What am I, John Justin?”

“The office cat.”

“She may be your partner, but I’m the office cat,” said Felina. “If you’re going to take her out to dinner, you have to take me as well.”

“Lay off,” said Mallory. “She has no one else. If I don’t take her out, who will?”

“I will,” said Felina. “Does she like mice?”

“Shut up, both of you,” said Mallory. “It’s Valentine’s Day, and I’m taking my partner out to dinner.”

“Why bother?” asked Felina. “We could eat her right here.”

“You’re all heart, Felina,” said Mallory.

“Am I really?” she said happily.

“Well, all appetite, anyway.” He fiddled with his tie. “I wish I knew how to tie a Windsor knot.”

“They don’t go well with forty-dollar suits,” said Periwinkle. “Especially *old* forty-dollar suits.”

Suddenly the office door opened.

“Put on your makeup and loosen your girdle,” said Mallory, putting the finishing touches on his tie. “I’m taking you out to dinner.”

“I call that downright generous of you,” said a deep masculine voice, “considering that we haven’t even been introduced yet.”

Mallory turned and found himself facing a huge man dressed all in buckskins. He stood almost seven feet tall, and his head was every bit as broad as his shoulders. He had large dark eyes, a pushed-in nose, a pointed chin, and a goatee, but his most unique feature was the two horns growing out of the sides of his head.

“Well,” said the man, staring at Mallory’s dilapidated desk and the photos of the Playmates, Joe DiMaggio, Seattle Slew, and the 1966 Green Bay Packers hanging on the wall behind it, “it sure *looks* like a detective’s office. Except for *that*,” he added, gesturing to the other desk, with its pens and pencils neatly laid out next to the small vase filled with flowers. “Where do you keep your arsenal?”

“Who the hell are you?” said Mallory, staring at him.

“Name’s Brody,” said the man, extending a huge hand, which Mallory took. “Buffalo Bill Brody. Ever hear of me?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“Damn! Don’t you read the papers?” said Brody.

“Not when I can help it.”

“He reads the *Racing Form*,” added Periwinkle, “but after all these years he still doesn’t know how to correctly interpret it.”

“Well, I’m in town for the big show,” said Brody.

“Some Broadway opening?” asked Mallory.

“Eastminster, Mr. Mallory,” said Brody. “Eastminster.” Mallory looked confused. “Biggest show in the country, maybe the world. I got me a dragon farm out in New Mexico. Show my dragons all over the Southwest. But until this year, I never had a reason to come to Eastminster. Now I do. According to all the papers, I’ve got the favorite.”

“Okay, you’ve got the favorite,” said Mallory.

“Except that I *don’t* have her.”

“You want to explain that to me?”

“She’s been kidnapped, Mr. Mallory,” said Brody. “Or dragonnapped, or whatever the hell the word is. I need you to find her.”

“Are you sure you need a detective?” said Mallory. “I mean, how the hell hard can it be to hide a dragon in Manhattan? It’s kind of like hiding a T. Rex, isn’t it?”

“Not all dragons are huge,” replied Brody. “As it happens, Fluffy is eleven inches at the shoulder.”

“They call that a miniature?” asked Mallory, remembering poodles back in *his* Manhattan.

Brody shook his head. “Miniatures are twelve to eighteen inches. Fluffy is a toy dragon.”

“Well, let me revise my initial statement. It will be impossible to spot an eleven-inch anything in Manhattan if someone wants to hide it. There’s not much you can do until you get a phone call demanding ransom.”

“Damn it, man!” bellowed Brody. “She’s due in the ring at four o’clock tomorrow afternoon! She wasn’t kidnapped for ransom! She was kidnapped because some rival knows that’s the only way he can win the show.”

“How much is the show worth to the winner?” asked Mallory.

“A ten-cent piece of ribbon and a trophy that can’t be melted down for a hundred dollars.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“I’m a *sportsman!*” said Brody. “I’ve spent my whole life trying to come up with something good enough to win Eastminster, and I’m not going to take this lying down!”

“When did she turn up missing?” asked Mallory.

“About three hours ago.”

“Where did you last see her?”

“She was in her pen in my hotel suite, with a couple of tarantulas I brought along to keep her company,” said Brody. He smiled. “She just loves those spiders.” A brief pause. “I went down to the restaurant for lunch, and when I got back the spiders were still there, but she was gone.”

“What’s she worth on the open market?” asked Mallory.

“Nothing.”

Mallory frowned. “The potential Best in Show winner is worth nothing? That doesn’t sound right, Mr. Brody.”

“Call me Bill.”

“Whatever I call you, it doesn’t sound right.”

“She’s worth a quick hundred thousand or more to *me*,” he said. “Between the price her offspring will bring if she wins, and the reflected glory on the ranch and the breeding program, she’ll be worth at least that much after tomorrow. But she’s not worth anything to anyone else. She’s the most easily identifiable show dragon in the country, maybe the world. Put her in the ring, or let a knowledgeable visitor see her on your farm, and she’ll be identified in two seconds and you’ll be up on felony charges.”

“Have you got any photos of her?” asked Mallory. “Not that I can tell one toy dragon from another.”

Brody reached into his pocket and pulled out some snapshots of a scaly dragon that seemed to be all edges and angles.

“*Fluffy?*” repeated Mallory. “It looks like anyone who runs a hand over her will come away needing stitches.”

“She’s sweet and lovable,” said Brody. Then: “Well, except when she gets mad. I can loan you my kennel manager. He knows her inside out. I’ll send him here if you take the case.”

“Maybe we’d better discuss our fee first.”

“*Our?*” repeated Brody, glaring at Felina. “Do you mean that cat-thing is the famous Colonel Winnifred Carruthers?”

“No, Colonel Carruthers is out of the office right now. Our standard rate is—”

“Don’t bother me with details,” said Brody. “I’ll pay you a thousand dollars right now, and there’s a five-thousand-dollar bonus if you return her to me by ring time.”

Mallory swallowed hard. “I think I can speak for my partner when I say that we find the terms acceptable.”

Brody reached into a pocket, pulled out a wad of bills that Mallory decided could choke a full-sized dragon, or at least a gorgon, and peeled off ten hundreds.

"I'll draw up a contract," said the detective.

"Not necessary," said Brody. "Just find her."

He turned and walked to the door.

"Where can I contact you?" asked Mallory.

"I'll be at my hotel, just in case there *is* a ransom demand."

"That's what I meant," said Mallory. "What hotel are you at?"

"The Plantagenet Arms," said Brody. "Stupid name for a hotel. What'll they call the next one—the Tudor Legs?"

"Wouldn't surprise me at all," said Mallory. "There are one or two things I have to do first, and then I'll be stopping by."

"Why? I want you out searching for Fluffy."

"She was stolen from your room," explained Mallory. "It's a logical place to look for clues."

Brody shrugged. "If you think it'll help . . ."

"It couldn't hurt."

A tear rolled down Brody's cheek. "I want my sweet little fire-breather back, Mr. Mallory."

"We'll do our best."

For a moment Mallory thought the huge man was going to start crying in earnest. Instead, Brody stifled a sob and left the office.

"What did you think?" asked Mallory.

"The man clearly has an unhealthy relationship with his dragon," replied Periwinkle. "By next month you'll be asking for movies of them together."

"What *useful* did you think?" said Mallory wearily.

"I think he looks silly in buckskins."

Mallory turned to Felina. "I don't suppose there's much sense asking you for an opinion."

"Sure there is, John Justin," she said.

"Okay, I'm asking."

"What's an opinion?"

"Forget it."

"I can't until you tell me what it is."

"It's just like a Turkish cigarette, only different," said Mallory.

Felina smiled. "Good. *Now* I can forget it."

“Forget what?” asked Winnifred Carruthers, entering the office and kicking off her galoshes.

“I don’t remember,” said Felina.

“It’s starting to snow out, John Justin,” said Winnifred, hanging up her overcoat. “I thought maybe I’d make a pot of tea to warm me up before I walk the rest of the way to my apartment.”

“You’re not going to your apartment,” said Mallory.

“I’m not?”

“No. I’d planned to take you out for dinner, but we just picked up a job.”

“What kind?”

He told her about Brody and showed her the wad of hundreds. “We got about twenty-two hours to find the dragon if we want that bonus.”

“The case is solved,” announced Winnifred. “Do we have to return Fluffy to get the bonus, or merely tell this Brody where she is?”

“He’s paying us to bring her back to him.”

“Then the case is solved and there’s no bonus.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to explain that?” asked Mallory.

“Don’t you read anything but the *Racing Form*, John Justin?” said Winnifred.

“He reads all those men’s magazines he has hidden in the bottom drawer of his desk,” offered Periwinkle helpfully. “Well, he looks at the pictures, anyway.”

“If everyone’s through dumping on me, perhaps my partner can tell me how we solved the case and lost our bonus less than five minutes after I accepted the damned job?”

“Fluffy is the favorite for Eastminster,” began Winnifred.

“I know that.”

“Can you guess who owns the second choice?”

There was a momentary silence.

“Please don’t tell me what I know you’re going to tell me,” said Mallory.

Winnifred smiled grimly. “You guessed.”